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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study of a speech community, a group of approximately 10 women, aged 25 to 65, who met at least 3 times a month to knit, drink coffee, and chat. The paper notes that knitting circles have survived through history because they serve a social function that surpasses historical events--they are communities that co-construct the reality of their community through linguistic and educational experiences. According to the paper, the communication that occurs within the knitting speech community is both verbal and nonverbal, and the novices of the speech community in this study will be the experienced knitters of future circles, thanks to their acceptance in this circle. Research questions addressed in the paper were how the members of this speech community use language to co-construct "teaching moments" and whether there is a difference between the speech acts used by experienced knitters and by novice knitters. After 10 meetings where the ethnographer spoke with key members of the group, patterns emerged which helped answer the research questions. Knitting was identified as a craft with its own terminology; the language used by members of the community established social roles and novice knitters employed different speech acts than more experienced knitters did. Typically a less experienced knitter asked for assistance from a more experienced knitter. The language used by the speech community allows the co-construction of meaning that shapes the group, and allows learning to take place among its members. The social interactions within the knitting circle promote a caring atmosphere open to dialogue, and that the dialogue and language used to ask for help define the educational roles of master and apprentice knitters. (NKA)

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Social Interactions and Learning In an Informal Setting: An Ethnography of Communication in a Knitting Circle

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Walking into the local bookstore on a cold January night, I was anxious about meeting my group. Having knit for ten years and feeling fairly confident in the project I had chosen to undertake, an off-white cable sweater, I was now eager to meet the speech community I had chosen to study, a group of approximately 10 women, aged 25 to 65, who met at least three times a month to knit, drink coffee, and chat. As I walked into the warm bookstore, I checked my tattered knitting bag to see if my yarn had become wet from the misty snow outside. It was dry, and I was very grateful, because I'd rather smell the fresh brewed coffee from the bookstore's café than the acrid wet-sheep smell of damp wool. I noticed a familiar face, the owner of the local yarn store, and asked her where the knitters were meeting. She motioned to the group sitting in a circle of chairs by the poetry stacks. I had found the speech community I had chosen to study.

Knitting groups such as the one I chose to study are often looked upon as quaint reminders of a day when people's lives were not so fast-paced. Knitting circles, according to Anne Macdonald (1988) served a variety of purposes in society; most frequently, they were at their strongest when women were separated from their husbands, brothers, fathers, etc. due to wars. They have survived through history, however, because they serve a social function that surpasses historical events. Women have been knitting since time immemorial. In today's society, Macdonald says, women knit "to save money…to calm nerves…to make gifts…to keep busy and/or out of trouble…to be sociable…to be creative" (pp. xx – xxi). Macdonald fails to note one element of knitting circles that ensures their survival; knitting circles are speech communities that co-construct the reality of their community through linguistic and educational experiences.

The language used by the speech community that is the knitting circle unites the group, and provides an atmosphere of caring that ensures that questions can be asked freely. Nel Noddings (1984) notes "Dialogue and practice are essential in nurturing the ethical ideal (p. 123)". In Noddings' view, teaching is a relational activity, in which both teachers and students have roles to play; the teacher is the one-caring and the student, the cared-for. Dialogue between these two roles ensures that an atmosphere favorable to learning can exist. Pervading the knitting circle, in which women gather to knit, share stories, and information, is this sense of caring and sharing.

Social roles within the speech community are linguistically defined. Within the circle of participation of this speech community are a core group of expert knitters with as much as fifty years experience knitting. On the periphery sit, both figuratively and literally, less experienced knitters. Lave and Wenger (1991) see this situation as being an important facet of learning; through language and experience, apprentices become accepted as part of a circle of masters. The novices of the speech community that I study today will be the experienced knitters of future circles, thanks to their acceptance as novices in this knitting circle.

The communication that occurs within the knitting speech community is both verbal and non-verbal. Expressions of frustration such as whines, moans, and sighs, are perceived as calls for help within this community. To Voloshinov these emotional outbursts would be perceived as signs, which he noted, "may not be divorced from the concrete forms of social intercourse" (p. 44). Without an understanding within the community that an exasperated sigh is the equivalent of a request for assistance, this signal would be ignored, and the needs of the novice would not be met.

Finally, the interaction between novices and experienced knitters can be defined as following expected patterns. Bakhtin (2000) chose to refer to these semi-formulaic speech functions as "genres". The genres are culture- and speech community-specific, and are defined by the members of the community that uses them. A college student introduction genre, for example, might be depicted as "Hello. My name is (name), and I'm a (school year) at (school) university. I'm majoring in (specialty)." because it is a common pattern of introduction among college students. Among college professors, such an introduction would seem incongruous! In the knitting circle, specific genres are used by novices and by experienced knitters when asking for assistance.

Gumperz (1983) took this idea one step further, studying not only the utterances but also responses to them. Focusing on conversation rather than simply statements, Gumperz sees conversation as necessarily co-constructed. There is a sense of thematic continuity that maintains the conversation and ensures that the linguistic negotiation results in co-construction of meaning. Gumperz' ideas, plus the terminology used by Hymes (1972) to define speech acts and speech communities form the theoretical basis of this study.

In observing this knitting circle, I wished to answer two research questions. My first concern was how the members of this speech community use language to co-construct "teaching moments". In answering this question, I hoped to gain a better insight into the use of language within the speech community. I also wanted to know if there is a difference between the speech acts used by EKs and those used by NKs in co-constructing "teaching moments".

With these questions in mind and ideas derived from my reading, I started

attending the meetings of the knitting circle. After ten meetings in which I spoke with key members of the group, I began to see patterns that helped me answer my research questions.

The participants and the setting

The participants in this study were categorized into two groups according to their experience knitting. An initial categorization of "experts" and "novices" had to be revised when interviews revealed that the members of the speech community that I had considered to be "experts" did not consider themselves to be so. I, therefore, bow to Jean's description of herself as "a well-practiced knitter" and Sarah's self-description as "I don't consider myself a proficient knitter at all although my staff keeps saying, 'You know more than you think!'" and have adjusted these terms to be "experienced" and "novice" knitters.

Novice knitters (NK) are defined for this study as knitters starting their first or second project. I focused my study on the interactions of three of these novices, named for this study Kate, Angela, and Laurie, with other members of the speech community. Experienced knitters had completed a variety of knitting projects. For this study, four experienced knitters (EK) were observed more closely than the others, Lucy, Jean, Ronnie, and Sarah.

The group meets at least three times a month; the first and last Wednesday and the last Tuesday of each month, they meet at local bookstores, and the second Thursday, the local knitting Guild meets at the home of a member. The Guild also sponsors a monthly "sampler night", in which all knitters are invited to meet and learn a new stitch. While there is no formal structure to the group, one member of the circle does generate a

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monthly newsletter to make other group members aware of upcoming gatherings. Several of the members are connected with the local university; others are old friends. The uniting factor of the group is an interest in knitting, a desire to learn from each other, and a genuine devotion to the speech community as "a place to talk", as one member described it. Sarah summed up what attendance in the circle means to many of the participants: "I always grieve if I can't be there."

While the group generally meets in a more or less circular grouping of chairs within Borders or Barnes & Noble bookstores, the seating pattern of the group revealed certain aspects of both groups. Sarah had expressed concern that novices to the group would feel like they did not belong in the group, saying "there's always the possibility that someone might feel left out". Interestingly, Lucy, Jean, and Ronnie did tend to sit together in the group, whereas novices usually surrounded Sarah. Jean felt that part of the reason why the novices clustered around Sarah was because she was often their first introduction to "the wonderful world of knitting"! Sarah is the owner of a local yarn store, and, as such, the initial source for the materials and instruments the novices needed to gain access to the group.

Methodology

I learned to knit in 1990, while working on my master's degree, and have, since that time, been involved in knitting circles in different locations. It was, therefore, very easy for me to become a fully participating observer in this speech community. While this gave me great insight into what it meant to be a member of this community, it did make certain aspects of my research difficult. It was difficult for me to take full field notes while I observed the group, and, therefore, I took jottings of my observations

sporadically throughout the speech events, which I clarified in field notes immediately after the group met. A formal interview with Sarah yielded information about the makeup of the speech community and the larger community of knitters. Informal interviews, conducted at meetings of the speech community with Jean, Lucy, Kate, and Ronnie, provided me with more information. In addition, I audiotaped two meetings of the group. In total, I met with the group for ten meetings at Borders and Barnes & Noble bookstores, spending a total of twenty hours observing the speech community and knitting with them. I am continuing my involvement with this group, as I believe that my knitting project, which is still not finished, is being constructed with the support of the members of this speech community. Taking on such a role within the speech community has led me to understand their devotion, or, as Sarah put it, "the addiction" to this craft.

Findings

As a speech community, the knitting circle has its own set of linguistic jargon and rules that help shape the identity of and establish solidarity within the community. It has its own vocabulary that separates it as a speech community. Nowhere could this be seen better than at meetings held in public places, such as the bookstores.

Knitting is a craft that has its own set of terminology. Knitters begin their projects by casting on, or securing the first stitches on their needles. As they knit they use different terms to describe their stitches to others in the knitting speech "population" – from the very basic "knit" and "purl" to more complex stitches such as "yarn over", "slip one", and "bind off". When knitters discuss the raw material they use to create their projects, they talk about "weights" (essentially, the thickness of the yarn) and "dye lots" (yarn that has been dyed in the same vat at the same time is considered to be of one "dye

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lot". This becomes important because knitters recognize color differences between dye lots).

Within the speech community I have chosen to study, these basic terms are supplemented with jargon that is intended for use within the community. After my first meeting with the group, I received a newsletter which featured a list of slang terms used within the community. "To tink", for example, is to "unknit", or to remove problematic stitches one-by-one ("tink" being "knit" spelled backwards!). "To frog" a row is to "tink" on a grander scale by ripping out whole rows of knitting (the name comes from a play on the sound that a frog makes, "ribbit"). In essence, the speech community uses specific terms to construct the meaning of the craft.

Knowledge of these terms aids in requesting assistance and understanding the response. During Meeting 5, for example, at Borders Bookstore, EK Ronnie talked heatedly with the group about the news she had received that her son's wife is expecting their second child. She didn't notice that she misconstructed the pattern of the hat she was working on. Looking down, she saw the error and spoke to the group:

> Ronnie: Hmm. What do you all think, is there an easy way to fix this? I'm not paying attention, and used black where I should have used red.
>
> Jean: I'd just tink it. Lucy, what do you think?
>
> Lucy: Yeah, there's no need to frog the whole row.
>
> Ronnie: I'd hate to have to start all over. Thanks!

Anyone listening to this exchange without knowledge of the language of the speech community is excluded from comprehending its meaning. The situation is perfectly clear, however, to all members of the speech community.

Within the speech community, "teaching moments" are co-constructed using various speech acts and this community lexicon. For this study, I defined "teaching moments" as interactive exchanges in which one knitter asked for assistance from another in order to solve a problem and received a response that successfully solved the problem. The speech acts used in such teaching moments within this speech community were constructed to range from direct requests for assistance to indirect requests that take the form of advising. Sharing knowledge of the craft holds a place of importance in this community, and even the offering of compliments on a complete work can result in a detailed explanation of how the project was created.

The knitting circle is a speech community whose members engage in informal teaching and learning situations. The language used by the members of the community establishes social roles; novice knitters employ different speech acts than the more experienced knitters do. Different speech acts are used by the community to co-construct teaching moments, interactive exchanges in which information is shared with the intention of improving some aspect of a person's life.

Within meetings of the speech community, teaching and learning are common themes of discussion, and are visible in many of the interchanges between novices and experts. It is notable that there is a pattern of initiation of exchanges. Novice knitters (NK) ask for help from more experienced knitters (EK). Experienced knitters ask for advice from other experts. In my observations, EKs do not offer help to NKs; the NKs must make the request for assistance before receiving help. The speech acts used by NKs to ask for help are also different in form and function from those used by EKs.

The speech acts NKs use to request help take three different forms. The first I have identified is a blatant request, using the word "help" or one of its synonyms in the request. An example of this can be seen in the exchange below:

Meeting 1 January 30, 2001 Borders Bookstore

Angela (NK) has just started her first project, a scarf. She is sitting next to Sarah (EK).

Angela: OK, how do I start? Can you help?

Sarah: Sure, you have to cast on [put the first stitches on your needle]. Make a knot, then slip it on your needle, then I'll show you what to do.

Angela looks perplexed, makes a knot: OK, now what?

Sarah: Give it to me, and I'll show you.

Sarah demonstrates a cast on technique. Angela nods in apparent understanding. Angela wanted help with her project and used an utterance that featured the word "help", making it clear for her "teacher", Sarah that she wanted to learn. Sarah, for her part, recognized Angela's clue, and reacted to it. Angela's request was successful; she received instruction.

Another novice at the meeting also looked to Sarah for guidance. Their conversation was as follows:

Meeting 1 January 30, 2001 Borders Bookstore

Laurie (NK) sits next to Sarah (EK) and works on her first project, a scarf in blue novelty yarn.

Laurie: Sarah, how many stitches should I put on the needle?

Sarah: Well, it's really up to you. Try casting on 24, then see how wide the scarf looks. If you like it, you're all set. If not, cast on some more.

Laurie: OK. [casts on stitches]

Here, Laurie did not use the word "help", but framed her request with a direct address to the EK, Sarah, asking her a blatant question. It is notable that Laurie's one question elicited a detailed response from Sarah. As a researcher with teaching experience, I noted in my field notes that this is a suitable teacher's reaction to a valid question in a formal educational setting.

NKs also request assistance retrospectively, by reflecting aloud on an error they made. A representative example of this can be seen in the following exchange between Kate, an NK, and Lucy, the most experienced of the EKs.

> Meeting 3 28 February, 2001 Borders Bookstore
>
> *Lucy (EK) sits across the circle from Kate (NK), who is working on a navy blue wool headband, her first project.*
>
> Kate: [Looks at her project] Oh! What did I do?
>
> Lucy [catches the signal]: Here, let me see. [She crosses the circle and switches places with another novice] OK, you've twisted your stitches. Don't worry, we can fix it. You just have to do this. [Demonstrates, using her own project.]
>
> Kate: It's as easy as that?
>
> Lucy: Yeah. Nothing you knit can't be undone to fix mistakes, and we all make them!

Again, a novice's simple question (in this case, a simple past tense question, "What did I do?") elicited a response from an expert knitter. Kate received assistance and reassurance from her teacher, Lucy, who took advantage of the situation to share teacherly wisdom!

The third method of requesting assistance is a non-speech act in the traditional sense. NKs can use non-verbal signs to signal to their EK teachers that they need help. I saw this happen several times; two of which are described below.

Meeting 1 30 January, 2001 Borders Bookstore

Angela (NK) has problems knitting. Her green novelty yarn makes it hard to see if she should knit or purl a stitch. She lets out a loud sigh. Sarah (EK) immediately looks at Angela, and asks, "Need some help?" Angela smiles and says, "Just a bit!"

Laurie (NK) encounters a similar problem to Angela's. She looks at Sarah's knitting, then looks at her own. She looks back at Sarah's knitting again. Sarah picks up on the signal, and says, "Let me help you when I finish this row." Laurie smiles.

Without words, both Angela and Laurie requested and received assistance from Sarah. In part this demonstrates Sarah's perceptiveness to her "students". She understands the semiotics and recognizes the signs of problems. She immediately responds by trying to help them.

The speech community changed slightly with the setting. While the Borders meetings featured a combination of NKs and EKs, at Barnes and Noble, the majority of the participants were EKs. At these meetings, the speech acts used to request help changed as well. Blatant requests for help and non-verbal clues asking for assistance turned into requests for advice. An example follows below:

Meeting 5 Barnes and Noble Bookstore 8 March, 2001

Jean is knitting a sweater in a rainbow-colored novelty yarn for her unborn grandchild. The yarn is thick in some places, thin in others. She looks up and talks to Ronnie.

Jean: Shoot. I think I dropped a stitch somewhere. Any ideas about how to find a dropped stitch when you're knitting with a novelty yarn?

Ronnie: If I were you, I'd just hold it up to the light and look at the holes really closely.

Jean's request for help, answered by Ronnie, is not the request of a person frustrated or disturbed by her inability to solve a problem. It is, rather, a request for advice from a colleague.

In another situation, advice is requested in order to continue a certain pattern. In this case, EK Masha has brought a white Egyptian cotton lace to the meeting. Pointing to the pattern, a leaf and stem design, she addresses EKs Ronnie and Jean:

Meeting 2 Barnes and Noble Bookstore 7 February, 2001

Masha: I don't know if I like this pattern. Do you think I should continue it or just knit some plain rows?

Jean: I kind of like the pattern. I'd keep it going.

Ronnie: Yeah. I like it, too. Why not just make it a bit smaller by decreasing stitches in this cable if it really bothers you?

This exchange is notable in that it illustrates another tendency of EKs asking for assistance. Masha's request for advice is not directed to any one EK, and is answered by more than one, usually working collaboratively to help the EK asking the question to construct a solution. Masha does not receive a direct answer to her question, but has two suggestions from two valued colleagues that she can weigh and decide which to act upon.

Finally, EKs also use speech acts that respond to compliments to share information. One example of this is as follows:

Meeting 5 Barnes and Noble 8 March, 2001

Ronnie (EK) has brought a nearly completed project to the circle. The project, a sweater for her husband, is made of wool Ronnie bought in Wales and is in a

heather gray/purple/blue color with a tan border. The stitch is lattice-work, like a garden trellis. Anna (EK), the researcher, comments on it.

Anna: Ronnie, that's beautiful! I love this stitch [points to the trellis-like stitch.]

Ronnie: Isn't it nice? That stitch is just a yarn over on every other row. See, if you look close you can see it!

Anna did not ask for an explanation of the stitch, but rather was complimenting Ronnie on her masterwork. Ronnie, in contrast, used the compliment as an opportunity to teach Anna, who is interested in the effect of the stitch.

Conclusions

The knitting circle is a speech community united not only by its common goal of providing its members with a place to practice their craft, but also by its use of a common, community-specific language. The language used by the speech community allows the co-construction of meaning that shapes the group, and, more importantly, allows learning to take place among its members. Just as everyone in the group has her own "role", based largely on experience knitting, each role has its own speech topics and patterns.

In asking for assistance, there is a pattern in the initiator of each exchange. Typically, a less experienced knitter asks for assistance from a more experienced knitter; very rarely do experienced knitters offer their help to novices without receiving some signal, even a sigh of frustration. When I asked Jean about this, she explained, "I really think it's better to learn by doing. Part of that learning means making mistakes and knowing when and who to ask for help." Lucy added, "And besides, we don't want them [the novices] to feel like we're looking over their shoulders. I know it would make me nervous!" Other experienced knitters also expressed the fear of frightening the novices.

No help is offered, in Ronnie's view, because that help could "scare them away!"

Among the experienced knitters, a sense of collegiality prevails, but there is still a sense that certain knitters are far more advanced in their expertise than other knitters. While most questions asked by experienced knitters are directed toward the group in general, most of the answers come from the most advanced master knitters. Jean explained this as being as much a case of familiarity as respect for fellow knitters. "I know Ronnie very well; we've been knitting together for years. I know she wouldn't steer me wrong." I asked Ronnie who she would turn to if she had a problem. "It depends on the problem. For something big, I'd probably consult with Lucy. She's been knitting for a long time." Lucy, for her part, revealed that she, too, has an "expert" to ask, adding, "Yeah, you ask me, and I'll ask Mary!" I later found out that Mary is an elderly woman who knitted with the group before she entered a nursing home.

From a sociolinguistic point of view, certain speech acts are common to knitters at different levels of experience. In terms of teaching and learning that occur within this speech community, novice knitters, like novice language users, ask for assistance blatantly, receiving in response from their more experienced teachers a verbal description, and, often, visual demonstration of the solution to the problem. More experienced knitters view the other experienced knitters as colleagues, and ask for help by eliciting advice. They are more likely to weigh the advice of their fellow "experts" and either act on the advice or simply thank their advisor for the tip.

My study has its limitations, admittedly. I was unable to videotape the group, as I had wished, due to issues of bureaucracy in the bookstores in which the meetings were held. The group itself is very homogeneous in its makeup; examining a more culturally

diverse knitting group might yield vastly different interaction patterns. For the time being, however, it must be noted that this pilot study yielded information about the endurance of groups such as the knitting circle, which strive to keep a human touch in the face of a society becoming rapidly computerized.

The social interactions within the knitting circle promote a caring atmosphere open to dialogue. The dialogue and language used in the group to ask for help define the educational roles of master and apprentice knitters. Communication within the speech community occurs both verbally, using speech acts accepted by the speech community and non-verbally through signals recognizable to members of the community. The forms the speech acts take can be categorized into specific "help" and "advice" genres. Above and beyond, however, the speech community co-constructs meaning through the social interactions of its members. Anne Macdonald (1988) was correct in focusing on the greater role knitting circles play in the lives of the people who make them up. As this study has hopefully shown, knitting circles are educational experiences in their own right, and these educational experiences are co-constructed linguistically by the members of this unique speech community.

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